Title: The Effectiveness of an Advocacy Program for Parents of Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Introduction: Recognizing the importance of parental involvement, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, the federal special education law) embeds many rights for parents including consent for: evaluations, placement, and services. However, many parents struggle to advocate for their children. Barriers to advocacy include: lack of knowledge (Leiter & Krauss, 2004); feelings of intimidation (Fish, 2008); and inaccessible procedural safeguards (Mandic et al., 2012). As such, parents of children with disabilities may seek an advocate with special education expertise to help them understand their child’s rights and secure services. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of an advocacy program.

Method: We conducted a quasi-randomized control design comparing parents of children with disabilities who participated in the advocacy program (n = 17) to parents of children with disabilities who did not participate in the advocacy program (n = 18). The advocacy program was comprised of 36 hours of instruction to empower participants to advocate for their own children as well as other families. There were no significant demographic differences between the groups. Using a MANCOVA, we controlled for pre-survey scores and compared the intervention and control groups with respect to: empowerment (Koren et al., 1992), the quality of the family-school partnership (Summers et al., 2005), special education knowledge (Burke et al., 2016), optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992), self-mastery (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) and parental distress (Abidin, 1990).

Results: After the program, the intervention (versus control) group participants demonstrated significantly stronger family-school partnerships based on the Family-Focused and Child-Focused subscales (F = 13.32, p < .001, ES = .34 and F = 5.02, p = .03, ES = .16, respectively) and special education knowledge (F = 13.46, p < .001, ES = .34). Also, intervention (versus control) group participants demonstrated significantly reduced parental distress (F = 4.63, p = .04, ES = .15). There were no significant differences with respect to optimism or self-mastery.

Discussion: This pilot study indicates that advocacy programs may be helpful to parents of children with disabilities. While previous studies have suggested a significant positive relation between stress and advocacy as well as a negative relation between advocacy and family-school partnerships (Burke & Hodapp, 2014), this study suggests that advocacy training may reduce parental distress and improve family-school partnerships. Future research should include a larger sample to determine the effectiveness of advocacy programs. Practitioners should consider advocacy programs for the families that they serve.

References/Citations: